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ABSTRACT

In a rural school district in northern Michigan, video is used as an administrative tool to communicate with board of education members, staff, and students. The great distances between schools makes board visits to areas of interest impractical. The district superintendent uses videos to take the board on tours of facilities so that they can get close-up views of maintenance and renovation problems, and to allow board members to view classroom activities at their convenience. Videos of maintenance problems have also been used to develop priorities for summer maintenance schedules; in one case, such videos led a manufacturer to replace a faulty roof. With regard to the district's team management approach, video provides firsthand observation of problems and issues, allowing the team to reach a common understanding prior to decision making. Video is an inservice tool for presenting information to staff at a fraction of the cost of a formal inservice program. Teacher applicants may send video resumes, complete with demonstrations of teaching effectiveness, or may have a long-distance interview via interactive video. From an instructional point of view, video provides students with another medium to express competency in a given subject area. A student anti-drug advocacy group has used video to inform classmates about problems associated with misuse of alcohol. Administrators have used "hidden" videos to confront students about smoking behavior. (SV)

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Video as a Leadership Tool in a Rural School District

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Editorial Note: Dr. Blackmer is superintendent of a rural Northern Michigan school district of approximately 450 square miles. Video is being used as an instructional tool as well as an administrative tool within the district. It is being used successfully in communicating the educational program as well as other aspects of the district to this rural community.

The local newspaper's account of the regular monthly meeting of the Board of Education read as follows: "The superintendent took the Board on a tour of the district, stopping often to explain points of interest. Upon entering the gymnasium, the Board received a first hand view of a problem with the gym floor. It seems that the rubberized floor, now some eighteen plus years old, has worn through and was badly cracked. In addition to presenting possible hazard to students, it presented an image of the school district somewhat less than desired. Several members of the Board commented that it appears time to replace the surface. Moving on, Board members then viewed the roof of the high school building. The Director of Maintenance pointed out the remaining section of roof yet to be recovered and explained the process. Using a small piece of roofing material, he demonstrated how drains in the roof would be addressed so as to prevent leaking. The Board then turned its attention to the elementary building and its roof. Concern for the condition of the roof had been growing for the last couple of years and Board members took several minutes examining cracks in the roof shingles. Discussion then followed as to the best approach to take to seek assistance in finding a solution to the problem. The final portion of the tour visited hallways where lockers were examined. The condition of the lockers clearly indicated a need to repaint all lockers in three of the four hallways. Upon return to the meeting agenda, the Board took action to seeks bids for a new gym floor, authorized the superintendent to contract for the painting of the lockers and instructed the administrative team to pursue the replacement of the elementary roof". From this account, one would expect that the tour took

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the Board outside of the Board room and that the Board meeting lasted several hours. In reality, the Board meeting lasted less than an hour and members of the Board never left their seats. The tour was conducted using video.

Rural school districts share one thing in common - distance. Not only do students travel great distances to reach school facilities, but so do parents and members of the Board of Education. In addition to distance, the everyday work schedules of Board members makes it all but impossible, and for the most part, impractical to hold extra meetings. The same distancing phenomenon restricts access to Board members for visits to buildings, classrooms, or other items of special interest. The problem of availability for first hand observation is increased as most Board meetings are held in the evening when school is not in session. Most meetings are also scheduled for after dark, when visits to places such as roofs are prohibited.

For the last two years I have been using video to bridge the distance gap and have, in essence, transported the district to the Board room through this highly interactive medium. The old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words has never been more true than when video is used. Add sound and action to the picture and the impact becomes first hand, "up close and personal". Imagine taking your entire Board into an elementary classroom where students are performing a play as part of a reading series. Using video, Board members can enjoy the performance while learning more about the educational program; without disrupting the class or causing scheduling difficulties for members of the Board.

About a year ago, we discovered that the shingled roof on the district's new elementary building was experiencing premature aging. The problem appeared to be one of product failure coupled with possible faulty installation. Getting seven Board members to climb a ladder to the top of the elementary school to get a first hand look at the problem was impractical. However, as my Director of Maintenance pointed out the problem, the video camera captured the condition of the roof, documenting our concern. That evening, in the comfort of the Board room, members of the Board received a first hand look at the problem. Earlier, I had communicated the problem in writing through my monthly Superintendent/Board communication package. As a result of the video, a program of corrective action was developed, resulting in the replacement

of the roof. Using the same video, we were able to convince the manufacture and installer that a problem existed and were successful in prevailing on their warranty. The roof was replaced at no cost to the district. We now use video to record all aspects of any renovation conducted on school facilities. The tapes provide a history for future Boards should questions arise.

Video has an immediate impact. It is one thing to tell about an over crowded classroom, but another to have members of the Board experience it. The sights and sounds of 30 students in a single classroom designed for 24 provides an experience that words alone do not convey. The use of large screen televisions enhances that impact.

In addition to conveying information about the educational program, video also serves as an outstanding building maintenance tool. Each spring I do a walk through with the various building principals along with the Directors of Maintenance and Custodial Services. As we walk, we examine the ceilings for evidence of water leeks. We look at window treatments for energy conservation and esthetics. We look for areas that need to be painted, trees that need to be trimmed or parking lots that are in need of repair. The video serves as a chronicle of everything in need of attention. Summer maintenance schedules are developed on the basis of priorities noted in the viewing of the video. Video also provides a record as to when a certain area was last visited for maintenance or when a problem was first identified. At the end of the summer we watch the same video again and make note of our accomplishments.

At Alcona Community Schools, we utilize a team approach to management. Video becomes useful when time and distance prohibits team members from first hand observation of a particular problem or issue. Bus route problems for instance can be brought to the administrative meeting via video, allowing all members of the administrative team the same level of understanding and a pooled decision relative to the problem in question. We also use video when we visit educational programs or observe presentations that would be beneficial to a large number of our instructional team. With the advent of the Right to Know laws and other employee rights laws such as those regarding the handling of Blood-borne Pathogens, video provides an inservice tool that can be used to present information to new employees at a fraction of the cost of doing a formal inservice program.

Another use of video, now becoming more popular with rural educators is the use of video tapes for interview purposes with perspective teacher applicants. Video provides an alternative to interviews conducted over the telephone. Applicants living great distances from the local school district can effectively be interviewed using either pre-recorded tapes or interactive video. While this use is just catching on, its practical use will certainly become more exploited as school leaders learn to use video in the screening of candidates. In the future it will likely become common practice for college and university placement offices to send a video of a candidate, complete with a demonstration of teaching effectiveness and perhaps even video taped references. An enhancement of this process, to provide an immediate interaction between candidate and prospective employer, will be to transmit a live video interview using compressed video provided by the use of a video camera, a micro-computer and modum. This will allow local rural school districts to conduct interviews from the facilities provided by University Placement Centers. Using the two-way interactive system suggested here, the teacher candidate will also be able to learn more about the district and interact with the interview process as if in the same room with the interviewers.

From an instructional point of view, video provides students with another medium to express competency in a given subject area. Consider the impact on learning by producing a video on a subject rather than just writing a theme or doing an oral report. As our district continues to move along the path to becoming an fully operational outcomes based school, students are experiencing new and better ways to learn, to communicate, and express themselves. Video is serving as a useful, almost essential, tool in that process.

Recently, one of our building administrators became frustrated because of student smoking on campus. Working with the Director of Transportation, he set up a "sting" operation using one of the district's parked buses to hid a video camera. The one hundred and twenty minute tape was started just prior to the first lunch period and retrieved after the conclusion of the second lunch period. Once activated, the equipment required no additional attention. During that time, the camera was pointed toward the infamous "smoking tree", a protected place where students go to grab a quick smoke. The next day, students identified on the tape, were called to the office where they viewed the tape with the building principal. One can well

imagine the surprise when students saw themselves starring in a video now being called "The Smoking Tree".

P.A.A.W.S. (Preventing Alcohol Abuse With Spirit), a student anti-drug advocacy group, has also used the medium of video to inform classmates about the problems associated with the misuse of alcohol by teenagers. The group visited with the County Sheriff and County Prosecutor, and in conjunction with those two agencies, produced a video to inform fellow students of the consequences of alcohol abuse. The video aired in several segments. The video "visited" the local "lock up". Students saw the judicial process associated with arrest.

Finally, video is a versatile tool. When coupled to a micro-processor, the interaction of the two technologies provides a powerful learning tool. Students and teachers alike can easily master the process of combining pictures and words to express a concept or to create a lesson or develop a documentary report. We have found video to provide a learning and leadership tool capable of involving many persons in the educational process. While it is not always possible to get members of the community to come to the schools, it becomes rather easy to produce a video, air it on community access television or take it along with a VCR player to the local meeting of Rotary. The message that it brings is many times more powerful than the words we can deliver in even our best speech.